



U.S. Immigration  
and Customs  
Enforcement

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# News Release

## **22 MEMBERS OF TWO COLOMBIAN DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS CHARGED WITH CONSPIRING TO IMPORT MASSIVE QUANTITIES OF NARCOTICS THROUGH SEAPORTS IN NEW YORK AND CALIFORNIA**

*Drug Seizures by Law Enforcement in New York Force Defendants to Look at West Coast Ports*

Twenty-two members and associates of two Colombian drug-trafficking organizations, including drug ringleaders JOSE ESCOBAR OREJUELA and JORGE IGNACIO FIGUEROA, and retired New York longshoremen RAUL ADAMES and ALEJANDRO COLON, have been charged with conspiring to import multi-kilogram shipments of cocaine hidden inside cargo containers into the Howland Hook Marine Terminal ("Howland Hook") in Staten Island, New York, and the ports of San Francisco and Oakland, California, announced **ROSLYNN R. MAUSKOPF**, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, **MARTIN D. FICKE**, Special Agent-in-Charge, Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, New York ("ICE"), **JOHN P. GILBRIDE**, Special Agent-in-Charge, Drug Enforcement Administration, New York ("DEA"), and **MICHAEL C. AXELROD**, Commissioner, Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor ("Waterfront Commission").<sup>1</sup>

The defendants were arrested yesterday and earlier today in New York City; Dunkirk, New York; New Jersey; Florida; California; and Colombia. The defendants arrested in the New York City metropolitan area are scheduled to have their arraignments and initial appearances this afternoon before United States Magistrate Judge Lois Bloom, at the U.S. Courthouse, 225 Cadman Plaza East, Brooklyn, New York. The case is assigned to United States District Judge David G. Trager.

The investigation resulting in the charges announced today, code-named "Operation Pier Pressure," was led by ICE in conjunction with DEA and the Waterfront Commission, with assistance provided by U.S. Customs and Border Control, and was coordinated by the U.S. Attorney's Office. The objective of the ongoing operation is to dismantle drug organizations that smuggle narcotics through

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<sup>1</sup> The charges announced today are merely allegations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

the nation's ports. Investigative techniques utilized by law enforcement in the investigation included court-authorized wire and oral intercepts, cooperating individuals, physical surveillance, and review and analysis of prison telephone calls, correspondence and visitor logs.

According to the indictments, complaints, and a detention memorandum filed by the government, the investigation began in December 2000, when law enforcement learned that ESCOBAR was supervising an international narcotics operation from the Federal Correctional Center in Allenwood, Pennsylvania, where he is serving a 30-year sentence for his role in the 1995 importation of 180 kilograms of cocaine into Port Newark, New Jersey. As a result of leads developed in the investigation, in August 2001, ICE, DEA, and the New York/New Jersey Port Authority Police arrested five individuals and seized approximately 78 kilograms of cocaine from a container at Howland Hook. The five defendants were subsequently convicted of felony narcotics distribution charges in the Eastern District of New York. Following additional advances in the investigation, during the next two years, federal agents and inspectors seized another 270 kilograms of cocaine hidden in containerized shipments at Howland Hook.

A major development in the investigation occurred when law enforcement learned in August 2003, that a large shipment of narcotics would be arriving at Howland Hook. During the early morning hours of August 28, 2003, agents from ICE, DEA, and the Waterfront Commission observed three suspects emerge from Howland Hook carrying large bags, which they loaded into a pick-up truck. The agents arrested two suspects outside the terminal and gave chase to two others who fled in the truck. At speeds exceeding 90 miles per hour, the truck and its occupants ran through a roadblock and escaped.<sup>2</sup>

Thereafter, agents obtained recordings of ESCOBAR's telephone calls from prison, which confirmed that ESCOBAR had been expecting, but did not receive, a cocaine shipment at Howland Hook in late August 2003. Subsequent investigation revealed that the August 28 drug shipment was actually stolen by one of the members of ESCOBAR's crew.

Based in large part on the information agents learned from ESCOBAR's prison calls, in November 2003, the government obtained court authorization to intercept the telephone conversations of a trusted ESCOBAR associate. Those intercepts, as well as other investigative techniques, revealed that the ESCOBAR organization was expecting another cocaine shipment at Howland Hook in early December 2003. Agents established surveillance and on December 5, 2003, seized an additional 157 kilograms of cocaine at Howland Hook, with a street value of approximately \$3,925,000. Six individuals were arrested as they loaded the cocaine into a minivan.<sup>3</sup>

The government's subsequent investigation revealed that the August 28 and December 5, 2003, cocaine shipments actually belonged to drug organizations led by both ESCOBAR and JORGE IGNACIO FIGUEROA, also an inmate at Allenwood serving a life sentence for his role in a 1991

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<sup>2</sup> ICE agents later arrested five additional defendants who were involved in the August 28, 2003, importation or the subsequent distribution of the cocaine. All but one of these defendants are being prosecuted in the Eastern District of New York.

<sup>3</sup> In the following months, ICE arrested two additional defendants for their participation in the December 5, 2003, cocaine importation. The eight defendants are being prosecuted in the Eastern District of New York.

importation of 244 kilograms of cocaine into the Tioga Marine Terminal in Philadelphia. ESCOBAR and FIGUEROA had joined forces and together were supervising the importation of cocaine from Colombia into Howland Hook, with the assistance of family members and associates in Colombia and the United States. ESCOBAR enlisted the help of longshoremen in Brooklyn and Staten Island to facilitate the importations by ensuring that the cocaine-laden containers were placed in easily accessible locations and by notifying the organization members if law enforcement was at the port. For each cocaine shipment, ESCOBAR tasked a trusted associate with hiring a “break-in” crew to sneak into the terminal late at night or in the early morning hours, locate the right container, remove the cocaine, and deliver it to associates waiting in vehicles outside the terminal.

In July 2004, the government obtained court authorization to record conversations between ESCOBAR and FIGUEROA and their associates during meetings in the Allenwood prison visiting room. Those conversations confirmed that as a result of law enforcement activity in New York and the costly losses of cocaine at Howland Hook, the two drug organizations were planning to import cocaine into another port, this time in the San Francisco area. During a prison meeting on August 22, 2004, FIGUEROA’s brother, WILLIAM FIGUEROA, relayed an associate’s concern that the situation in New York “is very shaky” and that individuals arrested at Howland Hook were talking to the government. WILLIAM FIGUEROA concluded “things are rotten here.”

In October 2004, ESCOBAR’s son, JOSE M. ESCOBAR, JR., and JULIO GONGORA traveled to San Francisco to meet with ESCOBAR’s longtime associate CARMEN RODRIGUEZ and her contacts at the port to discuss moving the drug-smuggling operation to the West Coast. Upon his return, ESCOBAR, JR. met with his father at Allenwood and reported that “the game cannot be done through the piers” because the ports in San Francisco and Oakland were under such tight security that cocaine could not be successfully imported there. ESCOBAR, JR. told his father that based on what “the supervisor at the pier” told him “the terminal is under 24-hour surveillance by the Feds.”

“The government’s investigation resulted in the seizure of millions of dollars worth of cocaine and ultimately forced the ESCOBAR/FIGUEROA organizations to give up the ports of New York as a landing point for their drugs,” stated United States Attorney **MAUSKOPF**. “When the drug traffickers tried to move their operation to the West Coast, they were again frustrated by law enforcement. Protecting the borders of the United States from criminal activity is a top priority of law enforcement. The men and women of ICE, DEA, and the Waterfront Commission are to be commended for their extraordinary efforts in this case.” Ms. **MAUSKOPF** thanked law enforcement agencies in Colombia, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey for their assistance, and added that the government’s investigation is continuing.

United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement Special Agent-in-Charge **FICKE** stated, “It is an ICE priority to identify and dismantle the vulnerabilities that can threaten the security of our country. Today’s arrests have taken violent criminals off the street and shut down an illegal drug trafficking enterprise that threatened the welfare of our communities. I want to thank the ICE Special Agents, the DEA and the Waterfront Commission for their assistance and support in this investigation.”

Drug Enforcement Administration Special Agent-in-Charge **GILBRIDE** stated, “The Drug Enforcement Administration stands committed with our domestic and international law enforcement partners in the fight against a common enemy, illicit drugs. The success of this investigation is the

result of the sharing of intelligence and a unified approach used to protect our nation not only from drug traffickers but from all who threaten our nation's security."

Commissioner **AXELROD** of the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor stated, "These are particularly difficult investigations, since some of the conspirators involved had the right to enter the cargo areas. Also, by right of this privilege, they had the opportunity to observe how various law enforcement agencies conduct inspections on containerized cargo. They further had the ability to move containers into areas that would give easier access to the break-in teams for the removal of the cocaine from the containers. The individuals arrested today have been in the sights of law enforcement for a number of years. Once again, the activity of the ring was successfully investigated by the Waterfront Commission and Department of Homeland Security Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Eastern District of New York. We have encountered groups like the defendants before, and we are ever vigilant to rid the Port of these corrupt individuals."

Four members of the OREJUELA/FIGUEROA organization who helped supply the Colombian cocaine -- GRECIA ESCOBAR, GUSTAVO FIGUEROA BEDOYA, PEDRO FIGUEROA BEDOYA, and WENCESLAO FIGUEROA -- were arrested today in Cali, Colombia, by the Colombia National Police, working in conjunction with ICE. The United States will seek their extradition to the United States for prosecution in the Eastern District of New York. Also arrested by ICE today were retired longshoremen RAUL ADAMES and ALEJANDRO COLON, who assisted the ESCOBAR/FIGUEROA organizations in removing drugs from Howland Hook. On September 23, 2005, ICE agents arrested EDINSON CHALAR, a current longshoreman, for his involvement in a separate conspiracy to remove drugs from Howland Hook between 2001 and 2003. EUGENIO ASENCAO was arrested today in Sanford, Florida, for his role in leading break-ins at Howland Hook and sending drug proceeds to Colombia for the ESCOBAR organization between 1997 and 2002.

Each of the defendants is charged with conspiracy to import cocaine into the United States, and if convicted faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years imprisonment and a maximum sentence of life, lifetime supervised release, and a fine of \$4,000,000. JOSE ESCOBAR OREJUELA, GRECIA ESCOBAR, JOSEPH ESCOBAR, JR., CENIDE TOVAR, and MANUEL LLANOS ESCOBAR are also charged with money laundering. If convicted of that offense, each faces a maximum sentence of 20 years imprisonment, three years of supervised release, and a fine of \$500,000.

The government's case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Carrie Capwell, Caren Myers, and Brendan King.

**The Defendants:**

JOSEPH ESCOBAR OREJUELA

DOB: 4/24/1942

Residence: (Incarcerated)

GRECIA ESCOBAR

DOB: 2/28/1944

Residence: Cali, Colombia

JESUS TOVAR  
DOB: 4/27/1957  
Residence: Unknown

JORGE IGNACIO FIGUEROA  
DOB: 8/11/1959  
Residence: (Incarcerated)

GUSTAVO FIGUEROA BEDOYA  
DOB: 5/23/1941  
Residence: Cali, Colombia

WENCESLAO, FIGUEROA  
DOB: 9/28/1947  
Residence: Cali, Colombia

PEDRO FIGUEROA BEDOYA  
DOB: 11/09/1933  
Residence: Cali, Colombia

WILLIAM FIGUEROA  
DOB: 2/11/1975  
Residence: Queens, New York

JOSEPH ESCOBAR, JR.  
DOB: 8/4/1971  
Residence: Dunkirk, New York

CENIDE TOVAR  
DOB: 10/26/1959  
Residence: Elizabeth, New Jersey

MANUEL LLANOS ESCOBAR  
DOB: 12/10/1960 or 2/26/1966  
Residence: Elizabeth, New Jersey

LUZDARI COMORI  
DOB: 7/29/54  
Residence: Queens, New York

JULIO GONGORA  
DOB: 4/21/1959  
Residence: Brooklyn, New York  
JOSE M. ESCOBAR, JR.  
DOB: 8/10/85  
Residence: Los Angeles, California

CARMEN RODRIGUEZ DE SALINAS

DOB: 8/4/1939

Residence: San Francisco, California

LUIS IBARGUEN

DOB: 9/6/1932

Residence: Brooklyn, New York

JOSE GUERRERO

DOB: 4/13/1965

Residence: (Incarcerated)

JANETH ESCOBAR

DOB: 12/6/1963

Residence: Queens, New York

RAUL ADAMES

DOB: 9/23/1942

Residence: Brooklyn, New York

ANA MARTINEZ

DOB: 12/13/1955

Residence: Brooklyn, New York

ALEJANDRO COLON

DOB: 1/27/1942

Residence: Brooklyn, New York

EUGENIO ASENCAO

DOB: 3/10/1940

Residence: Sanford, Florida

# ICE #

*U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). ICE seeks to prevent acts of terrorism by targeting the people, money and materials that support terror and criminal networks.*